

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6228

INFO AMEMBASSY CARACAS

AMEMBASSY TEGUCIGALPA

USSOUTHCOM

AMCONSUL MEDELLIN

AMCONSUL CALI

C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 7261

EO: 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT ECON CO

SUBJ: THE WEEK IN COLOMBIA

1. SUMMARY. CONGRESS IS SET TO CONVENE ON JULY 20 AND WILL BE DOMINATED BY THE CONSTITUTIONAL ASSEMBLY ISSUE AND RISING SCANDALS. THE GOC LIFTED SANCTIONS AGAINST UPI AND EFE. CHURCH LEADERS APPEAR TO BE RE-ENTERING PUBLIC DEBATE ON POLITICAL MATTERS AFTER LONG SILENCE ON ALL BUT SPIRITUALLY RELATED THEMES. FOLLOWING A THREE-MONTH SHUTDOWN CAUSED BY STUDENT RIOTING, THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY REOPENED WITHOUT INCIDENT. THE GOC APPOINTED MILITARY MAYORS IN NORTHERN ANTIOQUIA DEPARTMENT TO HELP QUELL POLITICAL AND CRIMINAL VIOLENCE. GRADUAL BUS FARE INCREASES WERE ANNOUNCED PROMPTING ONLY RELATIVELY MILD REACTIONS/ THE MINISTER OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT RESIGNED FOR PERSONAL REASONS. END SUMMARY.

2. CONGRESS SET TO CONVENE AS TWO MAJOR ISSUES DOMINATE ATTENTION.

CONGRESS IS SCHEDULED TO CONVENE JULY 20. TWO ISSUES PROMISE TO DOMINATE THE PROCEEDINGS: (1) PRESIDENT LOPEZ' PROPOSAL FOR A

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LIMITED CONSTITUTIONAL ASSEMBLY (BOGOTA 6745) AND (2) SCANDALS

OVER THE USE OF PARLIAMENTARY AUXILIARY FUNDS. THE PRESIDENT THIS WEEK DECIDED TO DELAY THE PRESENTATION TO THE CONGRESS OF HIS PROPOSAL IN ORDER TO STIMULATE DISCUSSIONS BETWEEN THE TWO MAJOR PARTIES OUTSIDE OF THE CONGRESSIONAL FORUM, THEREBY HOPING TO GAIN WIDER CONSENSUS IN FAVOR OF HIS PROPOSAL. WHILE THE PRESIDENT WOULD LIKE TO PREVENT THE PROPOSAL FROM BECOMING A PARTISAN ISSUE, AT THIS STAGE IT APPEARS AS THOUGH HE HAS STIRRED A HORNET'S NEST. FORMER CONSERVATIVE PRESIDENT PASTRANA, FOR EXAMPLE, HAS LABELED THE PROPOSAL A "PANDORA'S BOX". THE SCANDAL OVER AUXILIARY FUNDS (PORK BARREL), HAS SO FAR INVOLVED TWO MEMBERS OF THE CHAMBER OF REPRESENTATIVES WHO HAVE BEEN ACCUSED OF USING THE FUNDS TO LINE THEIR OWN POCKETS. ONE CONGRESSMAN TOLD US THAT THE SCANDAL COULD BECOME THE BIGGEST IN THE HISTORY OF THE CONGRESS.

3. GOC LIFTS SANCTIONS AGAINST UPI. IN AN UNEXPECTEDLY FRIENDLY ATMOSPHERE PRESIDENT LOPEZ MET WITH UPI REGIONAL DIRECTORS ON JULY 9 AND INFORMED THEM THAT THE GOC WOULD NOT AFTER ALL CLOSE THE UPI OFFICE IN BOGOTA (BOGOTA 7006). THE GOC HAD EARLIER CANCELLED UPI'S LICENSE AS A RESULT OF MISTAKEN TRANSMISSION OF A NEWS ITEM REGARDING THE ASSASSINATION OF THE PRESIDENT. LOPEZ REQUESTED IN RETURN THAT THE LOCAL UPI DIRECTOR BE TRANSFERRED. THE CHILEAN TECHNICIAN RESPONSIBLE FOR THE TRANSMISSION OF THE ERRONEOUS NEWS FLASH HAD EARLIER BEEN DEPORTED. THE SANCTION AGAINST THE EFE DIRECTOR, TRIBIN, WAS ALSO LIFTED FOLLOWING THE GOC DETERMINATION THAT TRIBIN WAS NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR EFE'S TRANSMISSION OF THE UPI ITEM.

4. CHURCH LEADERS SPEAK OUT ON POLITICS. THE ANNUAL EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE ENDED THIS WEEK AND IT SHOWED RENEWED CHURCH FOCUS ON POLITICAL MATTERS. THE BISHOPS MADE PRONOUNCEMENTS ON ISSUES WHICH THEY HAVE PUBLICLY SIFESTEPED IN RECENT YEARS. THE CRITICIZED PARTIES FOR THEIR LACK OF DEFINITION AND THE "RULLING CLASS" FOR NOT PROVIDING LEADERSHIP. THEY DENOUNCED CONGRESS FOR CORRUPTION, ADMINISTRATORS OF JUSTICE FOR NOT DOING THEIR JOB, AND SECURITY FORCES FOR INEFFECTIVENESS. SOME BISHOPS EXPRESSED SUPPORT FOR PRESIDENT LOPEZ'S CONSTITUTIONAL ASSEMBLY PROPOSAL. EXPLAINING THE REVIVAL OF CONCERN OVER POLITICS, THE BISHOP OF MEDELLIN SAID,

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"THE CHURCH CANNOT
FAIL TO TAKE NOTE OF THE POLITICAL REALITY OF THE COUNTRY".
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BUT THERE APPEARS TO BE A MORE IMMEDIATE REASON FOR THE HIERARCHY SPEAKING OUT. DURING THE CONFERENCE ONE BISHOP DENOUNCED A CONSPIRACY AGAINST THE CHURCH FORMULATED BY MARXISTS FROM WITHIN AND WITHOUT. A RELIABLE SOURCE SAID THAT THIS IS A REAL CONCERN OF THE BISHOPS AND THAT THEY KNOW THE "REVOLT" STEMS IN PART FROM A PERCEPTION OF THE CHURCH AS FAILING TO PURSUE SOCIAL REFORM. APPARAENTLY THE HIERARCHY HAS DECIDED TO CHANGE ITS IMAGE THROUGH A MORE

ACTIVIST STANCE ON TEMPORAL, MAINLY POLITICAL, ISSUES.

5. NATIONAL UNIVERSITY. THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF BOGOTA WHICH WAS CLOSED FOR SEVERAL MONTHS FOLLOWING VIOLENT DEMONSTRATIONS (BOGOTA 3650) , REOPENED ITS DOORS TO APPROXIMATELY 17,000 STUDENTS ON 15 JULY WITHOUT INCIDENT. NEW REGULATIONS SHOULD MAKE IT MORE DIFFICULT FOR SO-CALLED "PROFESSIONAL STUDENTS" TO REMAIN ON CAMPUS WITHOUT DEMONSTRATING SOME ACADEMIC PROGRESS. ANOTHER CHANGE PROVIDES FOR THE HIRING OF NEW PROFESSORS THROUGH COMPETITIVE EXAMINATIONS RATHER THAN THROUGH PERSONAL OR POLITICAL CONNECTIONS.

6. URABA. THE GOVERNMENT FURTHER MILITARIZED THE ANTIOQUIAN ZONE OF URABA ON JULY 15 BY APPOINTING MILITARY MAYORS FOR THE FOUR LARGEST TOWNS. THERE HAVE BEEN 83 MURDERS IN URABA SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE YEAR AS A RESULT OF BOTH GUERRILLA AND CRIMINAL ACTIVITY. BOTH CIVILIAN AND MILITARY LEADERS, INCLUDING ARMY COMMANDER CAMACHO LEYVA, WHO VISITED THE ZONE ON JULY 12, APPEAR INTENT ON BRINGING URABA UNDER CONTROL.

7. COST OF BUS TRANSPORT INCREASED. THE GOC ANNOUNCED THIS WEEK THAT FARES FOR URBAN AND INTER-CITY BUS TRANSPORT WOULD BE INCREASED GRADUALLY UNTIL CURRENT SUBSIDIES WERE ELIMINATED. FOR THE URBAN BUSES, USED PRIMARILY BY THE POOR AND THUS MORE SENSITIVE POLITICALLY, FARES INITIALLY ROSE FROM ONE PESO TO ONE PESO TWENTY CENTAVOS (ABOUT THREE AND ONE HALF CENTS). SEVERAL MONTHLY INCREASES OF TEN CENTAVOS WILL FOLLOW. THE GRADUALIST APPROACH TO OTHER UNPOPULAR PRICE MEASURES HAS ALREADY WORKED AND THE GOC HOPES THAT THE STEP BY STEP METHOD WITH THE BUSES WILL AVOID THE KIND OF VIOLENCE WHICH SURROUNDED FARE INCREASES IN THE PAST. SO FAR ONLY RELATIVELY MINOR INCIDENTS HAVE OCCURRED IN PROVINCIAL CITIES.
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8. MINISTER OF DEVELOPMENT RESIGNS. MINISTER OF DEVOPMENT JORGE RAMIREZ OCAMPO RESIGNED JULY 12 (BOGOTA 7073) FOR PERSONAL REASONS. HE WAS REPLACED BY DIEGO MORENO JARAMILLO WHO HAD EARLIER BEEN VICE MINISTER.
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